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A PLAN FOR THE STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS.

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The history contained in the book of Acts is of the first importance for the student of early Christianity. Here we trace the beginnings of the Church's life, and behold its various conflicts and successes from the day of Pentecost to the imprisonment of the Apostle Paul at Rome. The history covers the years 30-62 or 63, a period which is filled with events which are most significant as illustrating the progress of the Church. The various narratives may be studied from different points of view. The three most important seem to be:—

- (1) The relation of the history to the chief actors in it, Peter and Paul.
- (2) The Book of Acts as a record of the Church's conflicts and persecutions.
- (3) The way in which the events narrated illustrate the expansion of the idea that Christianity was designed for all men on equal terms, and exhibit the effort to carry this idea into effect.

Keeping in mind these three points of view, the student would do well to go through the Acts, and note carefully in a book the bearing of each narrative upon each or all of them.

Taking the three topics in their order, I would make the following suggestions in regard to the method of study:—

I.

- (1) Divide the book into the two parts, of which one has Peter for its chief character, the other, Paul.
- (2) Collate the principal "acts" of Peter, and carefully define their number, circumstances and character, noting the sphere of his labors.

(3) Read all the discourses of Peter together, and determine (a) what was Peter's main subject in preaching, (b) by what arguments he illustrates and enforces it, and (c) what appears to be his attitude on the question of the reception of the Gentiles into the kingdom of God.

(4) Note the bearing of narratives in this portion of the book which do not refer directly to Peter (such as those concerning Ananias, Stephen and Cornelius), and define (a) their relation to the main course of the history in which Peter is the principal actor, and (b) the way in which some of these prepare the way for the introduction of Paul.

(5) Collate the facts narrated about Saul in the part of the book in which Peter still remains the leading character, and carefully estimate their importance for the subsequent work of the apostle to the Gentiles.

(6) Compare the narrative of his conversion in chapter ix. with the two others in the Acts, and with notices of that event in his Epistles (especially Galatians).

(7) In connection with this comparison make a summary of all the points of information which the New Testament furnishes in regard to Paul previous to the beginning of his Gentile mission (chap. xiii.), and define their relation to his work. (See especially Gal. i and 2.)

II.

In studying the Acts as a history of the persecutions and hindrances which met early Christianity, it will be useful

(1) To learn from what different classes the opposition arose.

(2) What were the motives of it?

(3) Trace the order in which the hostility of these classes developed, and find the reasons for it.

(4) Carefully note all statements and acts of the apostles which became the occasion of this hostility.

(5) What was the cause and nature of that hindrance which arose from such persons as are mentioned in xi. 3 and xv. 1?

(6) In reading the history of Paul's missionary labors, note (a) the forms and occasions of opposition to his work

from the Romans, and (b) any instances in which the Roman power appeared as his protector, and why.

- (7) Paul's trial, imprisonment and voyage to Rome.

III.

If the student pursues the course outlined above, he will be well prepared to trace the development of the idea that Christianity is for all on equal terms, which is the most interesting single truth contained in the whole history. The lines on which it should be traced may be indicated thus:—

- (1) The position and teaching of Stephen as foreshadowing Paul.

- (2) The process of training and broadening to which Peter was subjected (especially chapters x., xi.)

- (3) The conversion of the Samaritans and the Ethiopian chamberlain (chap. viii.)

- (4) The conversion, training and commission of Paul.

- (5) The mission at Syrian Antioch (xi. 19sq.)

- (6) Study the missionary journey of Barnabas and Paul (chapters xiii., xiv.) with reference to the following points: (a) its course and scope, (b) its events and successes, so far as given, (c) the class which it was principally designed to reach, (d) the means and methods of reaching them.

- (7) Study with great care the question that arose about circumcision (chap. xv., and compare throughout Galatians 1 and 2), and the deliberations of the apostles upon it, determining (a) just what the question was, (b) the view of the Pharisaic extremists, (c) the view of the Jerusalem apostles, Peter and James, (d) Paul's view, (e) on what ground they agreed, and (f) to what extent, if any, they remained apart.

- (8) Study the second and third missionary journeys, tracing their course on a map, and noting (a) the character and importance of the places visited, (b) where churches were founded, (c) the arguments and other means used by Paul to convince his hearers of the truth of the gospel.

- (9) Observe the lines on which Christianity was extended by Paul, and consider how both the directions of its extension, and the character of the centers in which it was planted, indicate the line of its advance in the centuries that followed, even to the present time.